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East Timor,
Options in foreign affairs
by
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First of all, I wish to apologise to all for not being able to be present in Lisbon in the company of so many wonderful people. I thank my good friend, the tireless Prof. António Barbedo de Magalhaes, for once again hosting a most timely seminar on East Timor and Indonesia.

For the honour of being in the company of so many prestigious participants in the conference I would make up any excuse to be in Lisbon in the summer. So believe me only reasons of "force majeure" are keeping me in East Timor.

I will start my remarks with our relationship with Indonesia. The last two years have seen dramatic changes in Indonesia and the holding of a great forum in Bogor in early May and this one in Lisbon attests to the changing times in Indonesia's history.

At the end of April president Xanana Gusmão was on a very brief visit to Jakarta where we had a warm and fruitful discussion with president Gus Dur and Foreign Minister Dr. Alwi Shihab.

In late November last year, only two months after president's Xanana's release from the Cipinang prison, we were in Jakarta and met with new president of Indonesia and several cabinet ministers, including all the top military leaders.

In late February this year, we welcomed in East Timor the visit of our Indonesian friends. President Gus Dur was accompanied by Dr. Shihab and the armed forces chief Adm. Widodo on a historic trip to our devastated country.

Our people warmly welcome our friends because they all knew of Gus Dur and hold him in high esteem.

Indonesia has opened a representative office in Dili and we have agreed that an East Timorese mission will be established in Jakarta, initially, as part of the UNTAET mission here.

Now I want to ask you, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, to stop for a moment and try to remember whether there has been a precedent in history of such a dizzying normalisation of relations between parties locked in a bloody conflict for a quarter of a century. In several instances even a change of government in the two countries did not diminish the animosity.

The ashes of the destruction of our country were still burning, a quarter of our people languishing in camps across the border, bodies were being uncovered, and yet we did not hesitate to undertake a painful and historic trip to the new Indonesia in November last year.

When the Indonesian delegation visited us in February this year, it met no hostility or hatred, and was able to see the destruction of the country, of such magnitude only possible if planned and carried out by a powerful institution.
This speedy normalisation of relations between the two countries has been possible for three main factors.

One, it was God's design that after 32 years of a repressive and corrupt regime, a Muslim scholar and human rights advocate was elected president of Indonesia, a man of vision, moral rectitude and compassion.

On the other side, the East Timorese are equally fortunate to have been given an exceptional human being as their leader.

The third factor favouring this rapid development of relations is that the peoples of East Timor and Indonesia were both victims of the same regime and never saw each other as enemies.

In late January this year, president Xanana Gusmão led a mission to Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea and China where we were warmly received.

Thailand and South Korea in particular are held in our hearts for their decisive leadership in the very difficultmonth of September when men and women of courage and compassion had to make the difficult decision to commit their troops to a foreign mission.

In spite of its limited resources Singapore's contribution with logistics, communications and medical personnel was substantial.

In December last year, president Xanana Gusmão was in Japan where he met with prime minister Obuchi. Only a few days ago, we held talks in Dili with visiting foreign minister Ono.

In October 1999 president Xanana was welcome in Washington, New York, Lisbon, Dublin, London and Canberra, where he received treatment reserved for Heads of State.

Ladies and gentlemen, what I am trying to say is that the current East Timorese leadership and the whole of the country are conscious of our geography and acutely aware of the need to foster relations with our two most important neighbours Indonesia and Australia.

However, a balanced relationship with our two neighbours can be accomplished only if we do not lose sight of other regional and extra-regional players. Hence, you will not see us focussing all our attention and energy on Indonesia and Australia.

We will spare no effort in building relations with other regional countries such as New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, China, South Korea and Japan. We are grateful for their support.

Beyond the region, two major power blocs weigh heavily in our thinking as we begin to develop a long term foreign policy and a security framework.

The US is a global power and wherever one turns there it is as an engine of the world's economy, trade and security.

If one belongs to the school of thought which holds the view that the now defunct bi-polar world dominated by two conflicting power blocs was a positive factor, then we miss the Cold War. However, if we believe that the end of the Cold War and the implosion of the former USSR was a positive development, the Washington-centred uni-polar world is not necessarily negative.

The awesome power of the only surviving super-power can be a tremendous instrument to foster peace and prosperity if directed with care and sensitivity. In the case of East Timor the US has been a good friend and we can only express our gratitude for its substantial support throughout the past difficult months.

The EU with its potential in developing into a single union of more than 20 countries comprising 400 million people will inevitably generate a more balanced world order. It is not farfetched to imagine that one day Russia will find its way into the great European house.

The competing trade and economic interests between the US and Europe will often prevail over their common cultural and political values but this rivalry is far more positive and preferable than the dangerous ideology-based rivalries of the Cold Era.

We are pleased that Portugal and Indonesia have normalised relations and we believe that with the issue of East Timor resolved, the two countries will develop even closer relations.

We know that for many years Portugal's determined support for East Timor made it appearing as an enemy of Indonesia. We feel bad that because of us relations between other countries had to suffer.

However, we hope that the new Indonesia will understand that what Portugal did for us was no different from what so many common Indonesian citizens also did. In the worst years of the Suharto era, many Indonesian democrats visited Portugal and were warmly received by the common Portuguese.

For better or for worse, Portugal colonised us for almost 500 years. Maybe it was East Timor's own fault that it happened to be on the travel route of the Portuguese navigators.

We hope that our neighbours understand that our relations with Portugal are unique forged over centuries and they became specially close in the last quarter of a century when this small European country refused to abandon its historic and moral responsibility towards a people it once colonised.
We share with the EU and the US solid values on human rights, democracy and the rule of law, values that the East Timorese learned the hard way, fought for and hence we will never give up.

After all, the East Timorese like their Indonesian brothers and sisters who have been in the receiving end of repression, know only too well that human rights and fundamental freedoms are not Western abstract notions but rather they are truly concrete, specific rights that affect their daily lives.

Because of its sheer size, resources and strategic location, Indonesia is pivotal to the region's stability and security. However, the old notion that security and stability can be maintained by fear and by the use of force has been thoroughly discredited not only in Indonesia but elsewhere in the world.

It is not appropriate for us to comment on Indonesia's internal politics and sovereign decisions except in so far as they directly affect our common interests.

In this regard, we wholeheartedly applaud the courageous efforts and leadership of president Gus Dur in reforming the country's armed forces.

The countries of our region do not face external threats to their security. However there is a common threat to peace and security that comes from within our respective boundaries with a destabilising potential for our region as a whole.

I refer to the threat that comes from unemployment and poverty, from the millions of our poor who cannot afford even a meal a day, who do not have a roof, access to clean water, school and medical care.

Industrialisation and modernisation brought us the benefits of the 20th century but at an enormous price.

This price is visible in our streets and slums filled with millions of our poor and dispossessed who abandoned the rural areas for the illusion of a better life in the cities blackened by pollution.

I was asked to speak about East Timor's future foreign policy and security and I cannot see it in isolation from the region and the world with all the challenges, problems, risks and opportunities.

East Timor's future prosperity is dependent on the region's well-being and it is our own self-interests that inspire our strategic options in foreign policy. Hence, our neighbours can rest assured that East Timor will be a responsible and moderating element in the region.

We believe that our security cannot be rested only on a credible deterrence force. We prefer a dynamic relationship with our neighbours based on shared interests.

We are continuing to learn about the potential benefits accruing from membership in regional organisations and multi-lateral treaty arrangements such as ASEAN, APEC, the South Pacific Forum, the Lomé Conventions and others.

We have been invited to attend the next ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting in Bangkok later this month.

We are touched by the warm support from president Gus Dur and from other ASEAN leaders to our possible membership in ASEAN. It is quite obvious that ASEAN is one of the most effective regional organisations and its importance in world affairs is beyond question. This is a tribute to the leaders of the region that have built this regional body into its current world class status.

We are also touched by the fraternal support from the small South Pacific island-states for membership in the Forum.

There is no denying the facts of geography and a glance on the map shows East Timor to be on the foot print of South East Asia as the Philippines foreign secretary put it recently. But the map also shows us on the borderline between the Indian and the Pacific regions and in close proximity to Australia.

Australia has been generous to us and we never forget our friends. We hope that relations between Jakarta and Canberra will improve soon. The proposal for a tri-partite meeting between presidents Gus Dur, Xanana Gusmão and PM John Howard should take place rather sooner than later.

President Gus Dur is a man of dialogue and the idea of a tri-partite meeting is consistent with his life-long conviction that dialogue should always be the means for peoples and governments to resolve their differences.

In the next few months we will be guided by our friends in the region as to the best approach and steps for regional membership.

With humility, always willing to learn from our friends and neighbours, with dogged determination and creativity, we will build a society deserving of the sacrifice of so many and the trust of the international community.

To those in Indonesia who did a lot of harm to us we extend a hand of reconciliation and friendship for we know they did not harm only us. They did much harm to themselves and to the good name of their own country. Hence we can hope that God will inspirethem to atone for the harm they have caused to so many and become better persons.

Thank you.